

Cancer patients 'relax' up the Icicle

I caught up with a group of gentlemen having lunch at the Sleeping Lady recently. They looked like a bunch of anglers. Many of them were, but many of them were going fly fishing for the very first time — on our own Icicle Creek. They were all part of a retreat planned by an organization called Reel Recovery. The group is dedicated to offering those afflicted with cancer an opportunity to “take a break” from the disease, by getting outdoors and experiencing fly fishing.

I had been contacted by Robert Bernard, the Northwest regional coordinator, and he explained that he helps scout potential destinations and gather the volunteer help needed to conduct a retreat for Reel Recovery participants. This was the third-annual Washington state retreat. Those who participate are provided with lodging, meals, fly fishing equipment and assistance on the water. Since May 2003, Reel Recovery has welcomed more than 600 participants at 54 retreats all over the nation.

The Reel Recovery program is more than a bunch of fly-fishing enthusiasts taking some people fishing. The program blends the outdoor activity with the opportunity for the participants to be part of sessions of directed conversation, facilitated by mental-health professionals.

“These sessions involve a lot of courageous conversation,” said Bob Boice, who came to his first retreat as a participant, and now as a volunteer.

The benefit of being outdoors and trying their hands at fly fishing was obvious to me. There were lots of smiles from these anglers. Byron Swedberg, who caught his first fish fly fishing, was even more impressed with the time he spent with his fellow cancer survivors.

“I wish you could sit in on one of these group sessions some time and hear what people share,” he told me. “There’s nothing else like it.”

Each participant is fully outfitted for the fishing adventure. They get waders, wading shoes, a rod and reel, a box of flies and a very special piece of gear — a fishing vest. Each vest is covered with

names, written in indelible ink. These names represent a participant that has worn it before. One of the volunteers told me that each vest invokes memories of previous retreats.

“Jim there, he came to our very first retreat. Bob, well he’s a volunteer himself now. There’s Fred, although, he’s gone now, he was a great guy,” he recalled.

The entire Reel Recover program is run by volunteers. All the equipment, lodging and meals are made possible through donations and grants.

“I understand that the Lance Armstrong Foundation helped provide the funding for the first retreats,” said Kris Kristoferson, one of the volunteers from the Washington Fly Fishing Club. “Most of the money comes from fly fishing clubs, Trout Unlimited chapters, and I understand that many of the Wal-Mart stores across the country contribute to our program.”

Reel Recovery Retreats are open to all men who are currently suffering from or are even recovering from cancer. As long as they can get a release from their doctors they can come. Even those who are in remission are welcome. They have a lot to contribute to the “courageous conversation” aspect of the retreats. The participants at the Leavenworth retreat were from all over the state, and Bernard traveled from Portland in his duties as coordinator. The volunteers also came from all over the state to help out. There was no shortage of volunteers. Every participant was assisted by at least one volunteer to assure a safe and enjoyable time on the water.

For more on the Reel Recovery program: www.reelrecovery.org or 1-800-669-4490.

From what I observed, the Reel Recovery program is about the distraction of being outdoors and having fun fly fishing. I couldn’t avoid knowing that it serves a much more serious purpose through the discussion sessions.

What wasn’t really clear to me was who was getting more out of the program, the participants or the volunteers.

I love their motto: “Be Well! Fish On!”

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